



Rejecting the Academic Fast Track

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Research universities may not be able to count on their ability to attract the best young faculty talent, a survey being released today suggests.

The survey -- of more than 8,300 doctoral students at University of California campuses -- finds that they increasingly care about finding careers at "family friendly" campuses. And the survey finds that they doubt seriously that they can build such careers at a research university. Both men and women have these attitudes although they are more pronounced in women.

"In the eyes of many doctoral students, the academic fast track has a bad reputation -- one of unrelenting work hours that allow little or no room for a satisfying family life," says a report on the survey, which appears in the new issue of *Academe*, the magazine of the American Association of University Professors. "If this sentiment is broadly shared among current and future student cohorts, the future life-blood of academia may be at stake, as promising young scholars seek alternative career paths with better work-life balance."

The survey found that 84 percent of women and 74 percent of men are somewhat or very concerned about the family friendliness of their future employers. But only 46 percent of men and only 29 percent of women imagine jobs in research universities to be somewhat or very family friendly.

And this skepticism of research universities may be greatest among those with good reason to know. Among new parents supported by federal grants at the time of the birth or adoption of a child, only 35 percent of men and 16 percent of women think that tenure-track faculty careers at research-intensive universities are family friendly.

Research universities' challenge may be an advantage for teaching institutions. The survey found that both men and women (82 percent and 73 percent, respectively) say that faculty careers at teaching-oriented colleges are the most family friendly in academe. They consider these positions more friendly than managerial careers or non-tenure track positions.

The survey results may be of particular concern in that the graduate school experience is shifting Ph.D. students away from the goal of a career at a research university. Of those in the survey, 45 percent of men said that they started their graduate programs wanting to become professors with a research emphasis. But the point of the survey, only 36 percent of men had that goal. For women, the drop was from 39 percent to 27 percent.

The proportional shift away from academic careers is even greater in the sciences, a finding that the researchers view as "particularly troubling given the low numbers of women in doctoral programs in physical science, technology, engineering, and mathematics."



The authors of the study are Mary Ann Mason, a professor in the Graduate School of Social Welfare at the University of California at Berkeley and co-author of *Mothers on the Fast Track*; Marc Goulden, a researcher at the University of California who has led numerous studies of these topics; and Karie Frasch, manager of the UC Faculty Family Friendly Edge project.

The researchers found a correlation between graduate students' attitudes about the potential for an academic career at a research university with what they see around them in their doctoral programs.

Of female doctoral students who report that it is not common for female faculty members in their departments to have children, only 12 percent said that they viewed research universities as family friendly. But among those who say it is very common for women in the departments to have children, 46 percent said that research universities could be family friendly.

Of the graduate students surveyed, 51 percent of women and 45 percent of men were married or with partners, and 14 percent of women and 12 percent of men were parents. Most of graduate students want children some day, but don't think they can have and raise children while they are working on their doctorates.

The California survey is in many ways consistent with surveys of junior faculty members conducted by the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, a research project based at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. On many categories of job satisfaction in COACHE surveys, new professors give higher grades to colleges than to universities, and care a great deal about issues of work/life balance, not just pay and prestige (the factors that have in the past favored research universities).

The new report from California calls for "new thinking and a new model to attract and retain the next generation in academia." Among the suggestions:

- Allow faculty members to "shift to part-time status or temporarily elongate timelines over their academic lives without suffering career penalties."
- Allow faculty members "to take time out temporarily from their academic lives for care-giving" and support their return.
- Abandon the idea that academic "stars" are "those who move through the ranks very quickly" and embrace the idea that the stars are "those who produce the most important or relevant work — faster is not necessarily better."
- Embrace the idea that "it is fine to have children at any point in the career path because a full array of resources exists to support academic parents."
- Challenge the stigma in which "having children, particularly for women, is often equated with less seriousness and drive."

— Scott Jaschik

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